Why not Conserve?

Delving into the Ground Realities of Conserving Unprotected Heritage in India

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‘A Trouble with Heritage’

Understanding the challenges for the stakeholders of our heritage

“Substantial problems arise as townscapes age, and as the social / economic conditions under which they were created change. Buildings become structurally, functionally, and economically obsolete.”

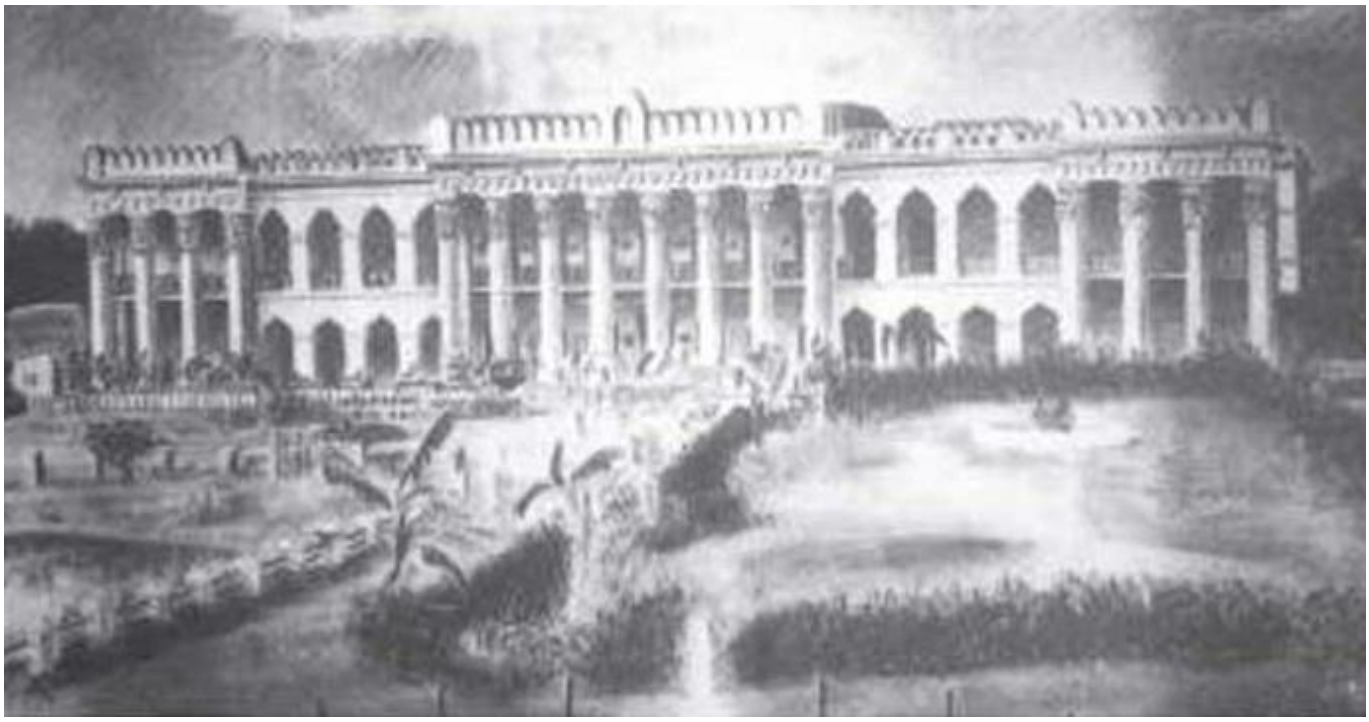
(Larkham, 1996)

Walking down the far-too-familiar neighbourhoods of the city I called home, one fine day, I arrived at a junction where a narrow lane diverged from the busy street I was on. ‘Basu Bati’ - read the yellow metal signage - pointing towards a well-known landmark at the end of the lane. My Bachelors thesis was to begin soon, and I was out in the winter sun of Calcutta hunting for some ‘case studies’. I took the quick turn onto a most-typical North Calcutta lane that was to lead me to my destination. As one moved past the food stalls at the start, the lane became quieter. Standing at the very end - offset from the centre of the grey tarmac - were 4 magnificently ornate Doric masonry columns that formed the facade to the portico of the mansion. Despite its state of dilapidation, the house adorned its aging riches – intricate cast iron railings, stained glass windows with elaborate arches, cornices and motifs in lime, and a marble plaque on the door commemorating Tagore’s visit in 1905 as aftermath of the Bengal partition[1]. One look at the house sparks the imagination of the average romantic Bengali, and gives a glimpse of what was once home to a very prominent family in the city.

Amidst all this, on the gate of the premises was another plaque. A circular one - made of metal - with a splendid coat of blue. The words on the plaque expressed a pitiful paradox. ‘Kolkata Heritage (under KMC). Basu Bati. Grade I.’ Two bystanders – one of who claimed to know the caretaker of the house – enquired if I were looking for someone. The following section summarises the tale of the house, gathered from multiple sources.

The mansion dates back to 1876 CE, and was built by the Basu family – of whom, the names Nandalal Bose and Pasupati Bose are the most well-known. Built in a shift from the typical colonial style, the house once had its own garden, a zoo and a stable *(Ghosh, 2022)*. This regal structure was rendezvous for eminent artists and revolutionaries, at the break of the 20th Century. With the abolition of the zamindari system resulting in family debts, the eastern wing of the house was given to the state government in 1956. *(Ghosh, 2022)* Over the decades, with internal conflicts of space, and family members moving out, finances became constrained and the mansion started falling into disrepair. The

The front facade and entrance portico of Basu Bati, featuring 4 large Doric columns, as seen in 2023.



A late 19th Century CE photograph of Basu Bati, featuring its glorious facade, and lush gardens in front. Credits: Amitabha Gupta, 2022

lands comprising the gardens and open spaces were sold or given away for tenancy, out of financial desperation over the decades of the 20th Century. The last set of family members left in 2007 after selling the property to a prominent real estate developer, who wanted to make a boutique heritage hotel in it.

However, their dreams of a heritage hotel came crashing when troubles arose with the clauses of listing coupled with questions of ownership. The eastern wing of the house had been given to the state government several years ago, to settle the family's debts. It now houses a library under the ownership of the KMC. The developer pugnaciously took to court – demanding for takeover of the entire property, and exercise of their ownership rights – while the KMC stood its ground. Nearly 20 years of tussles have borne no fruit, as the house continues to approach its doomsday. Old buildings across all our cities – at times, even when declared historic or 'protected' – often face a similar fate. People's lives do not possess the romanticism, and sentiments that the tales of these buildings do. And when grappling with reality brings one to the edge of fate, intriguing histories often bite the dust.

Triggers of Abandonment - A study through Cases

Before moving any further with the topic, it is important to understand why heritage buildings / houses get abandoned, or neglected in the first place. The previous section - on Basu Bati - highlights a few amongst numerous factors (such as strained finances, legal complications etc). While the subject of 'heritage' is near and dear to many, the practical challenges of protecting it are not discussed quite often. 'Traditional' conservationists mostly tend to be rather content in their bubbles to discuss the nitty-gritties of conservation, while local authorities and policymakers see no value in these structures except the land parcels, which are cash cows for them.

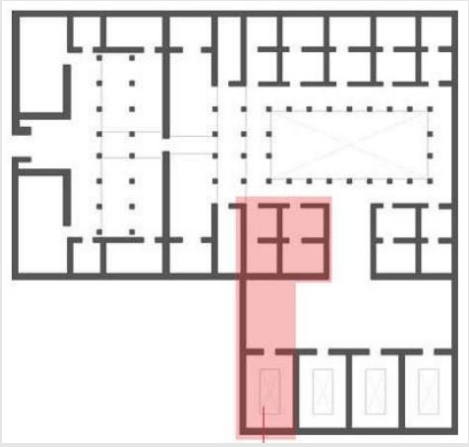
The following sections will delve into brief case studies of old buildings (houses, or otherwise) which were found to be abandoned, neglected, or in any stage of dilapidation. While factors leading to the same are often case-specific, there are patterns observed across places. The examples have been selected from different places of the country, to understand the challenges that affect stakeholders irrespective of geography, culture, or background.

Periya Thagarakottaiyar House

Built: Late 19th Century CE
Location: Athangudi, Tamil Nadu

The 2nd generation of the family had 4 brothers, resulting in the division of the house into 4 portions. By the time the 3rd and 4th generations came about, each wing was having 10-15 members who no longer had space to live in their shares of the property.

By the 1960s, family members started moving out because of the same reason. Many also started migrating to the city for better job opportunities. With fewer members to take care of the house, the old property started falling into disrepair. As of 2023, the house still stands - due to the presence of the family deity - but hardly anyone resides there.



The red portion shown here, was the share of one person who had 13 people to take care of. He moved out of the house in the 1960s, and currently resides in Chennai.

House of Dr Kailash Chandra Bose

Location: Kolkata, West Bengal

Built by one of the most well-known doctors of the late 19th Century Calcutta, the house of the Bose family suffers today due to the a lack of funding. Death of senior male members have resulted in stoppage of income channels for the family.

Moreover, the younger generations have more women who are not legal heirs, as per the inheritence laws. Many have also moved out of the city for better prospects.

House at Dhal ni Pol

Location: Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Many older residents of Dhal ni Pol have moved out over the years, resulting in commercialisation of the area. This has been accompanied by increased traffic, anti-social activities, and a bad repute of old neighbourhoods of the city. Narrow lanes, and old infrastructure have also led to disfavour.

After the old couple that resided in this house passed away, their son moved out of the neighbourhood, as it was being difficult to find a bride who was willing to move to the area! As of 2023, the house remains locked, and unused.

4A/4B Wedderburn Road

Built: 1930s CE | Demolished: 2017

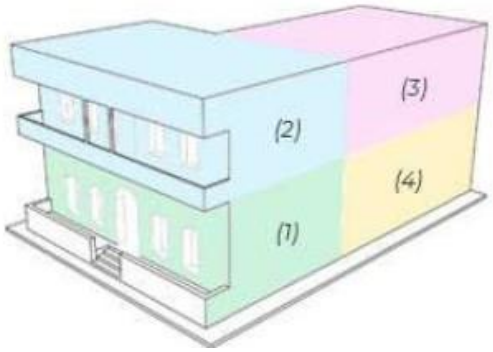
Location: Kolkata, West Bengal

Being an old construction in brick masonry and lime mortar, the house faced the typical challenges of moisture ingress, and dampness on the walls from the pipelines.

However, this problem worsened when the ownership of the house got divided between 4 cousins. Shown in the bottom photograph, was the ownership pattern of the house as of 2013. The portion highlighted in pink permanently remained closed, and they refused to pay for maintenance. As a result, damages to the house in that part directly impacted those living below, and adjacent to it. Recurring repairs and water issues, and expensive labours led to the residents choosing to move out.

Young members of the family had moved out earlier, and financial strain on pensioners led to the house being sold in 2013, and demolished in 2017.

Footnote: *My fellow Bengali readers would identify the scene from the 2013 movie 'Aschorjyo Prodip' (Shown in the middle photograph). The protagonist of the story - played by actor Saswata Chatterjee - lived in this house.*



***The Mullick Bari** - or house of the Mullicks - **in Pathuriaghata, Kolkata** today faces problems due to fewer members in the recent generations of the family (resulting in lesser incomes). It was once, the house of a prominent zamindar, and probably housed a 100 people. But today, only a small portion of the house is inhabited.*

The most common challenge, and factor attributed to the abandonment of heritage properties - as seen on site, as well as from literature study - is the "idea of the family in the 21st Century CE." *(Mitra and Mitra, 2022)* The definition of family has changed drastically in India in the last 50 years, and it would be unrealistic to state that joint families - for whom many of these houses were built - are still the norm. The young generation has almost entirely moved out from such places due to incompatibility of lifestyle, or in search of better opportunities. The former of these is of importance to us, and we must understand its impact.

(a) The demand for privacy is higher than it has ever been, and shared toilets, kitchens, and courtyards are not the kind of lifestyle that today's youth want. This has resulted in many people moving out of their ancestral houses, and refusing to pay for its maintenance as well.

(b) With the increase of family size with every generation, one's share in an ancestral property often gets determined by the number and gender of the children. This result in space crunch, and conflicts between family members.

(c) Divided ownership leads to difficult in consensus for any matter of maintenance, or repair of the property.

(d) In many cases, fewer children, or fewer men in the recent generations were also cited as reasons for negligence (due to lower income streams).

The reason why this factor becomes an important consideration is because **older structures - given the way the building industry functions today - are expensive to maintain.** Traditional materials such as lime and timber are expensive, and so are the artisans who have the skills to work with the same. Moreover, incorporating people's modern lifestyles into an old structure is also a major task. It is not easy work to install AC systems, or plumbing lines in a masonry building with lime mortar. Quite often, contractors - who are only comfortable with

modern materials and technology, do a poor job with an old structure. When incompatible repairs are done to old buildings by the advice of modern workforce, the eventual damage is much greater, thereby increasing the long-term costs. *(Bridgewood and Lennie, 2009)*

While conservationists often passionately advocate for the use of traditional materials and artisans, how often do they think about making it easily available to a greater number of stakeholders of heritage? How is conservation supposed to be practised in large scale, if its expenses can be borne only by a select few?

Another common factor which becomes a challenge in protecting heritage, in fact goes beyond the immediate boundary of a building. Most people, at large, prefer having their houses in residential areas of a city / town. But when the demographics begin to change, new problems arise. It is an established fact that old houses / buildings fall out of favour with the youth due to a multitude of reasons. However, any important factor that comes into play is that of building-use. Many people sell their old houses to commercial owners at a price much higher than that of those intending to buy it for residential purpose. This is a phenomenon that has been observed in many places, including the old neighbourhoods and *Pols* of Ahmedabad (such as Mandvi-ni-Pol). **When this practice repeats over a period of time, and commercial activity in an erstwhile residential neighbourhood increases, it often becomes unfit for inhabitation.** Deterioration of infrastructure, and increased vehicular traffic are only the tip of the iceberg. In many places, due to the economic backgrounds of lower-class workers, and labour, their social practices start affecting the older residents of the neighbourhood. In many cities, the old areas have a bad repute due to higher incidences of alcoholism, petty crimes, and anti-social activities. What was originally a respectable neighbourhood, becomes a low-income, and anti-social area over time *(Jain, 2023; Dedek, 2014)* Eventually, with the worsened social image and stigmatisation, majority of residents leave these neighbourhoods. The old buildings are left to their fate, and the vagaries of time. The phenomenon is - in fact - even observed in the case of protected monuments of our country. In many economically backward districts of India, monuments protected by ASI and State Archaeology Departments are used as dens by alcoholics, gamblers, and anti-socials. In many places, it has even been reported that people take wood and stone from old monuments to use as materials in their homes.

The pols of Ahmedabad are a good example of gentrification - the phenomenon of people moving out - and the disuse / change in use of historic neighbourhoods. Shown above is a photo of Dhal ni Pol in Ahmedabad.

Perhaps the last of the physical threats to our built heritage is the infrastructure projects which are supposedly planned for the 'development' of our cities and towns. **Instances of railway, metro, and roadway projects having a negative impact on our heritage are common.** While a certain set of precautions are sometimes taken while working on greenfield sites, most of these fail when having to work in old neighbourhoods. A well-known example is metro tunnel boring work in Bowbazar, Kolkata which resulted in the damage of the foundations of several century-old buildings. The following section describes one such case of an infrastructure project in detail.

The Case of Velsao, Goa

Velsao is a quaint village in the Mormugao-Vasco belt of Goa. Plastered laterite stone, mud, timber roofs with tiles characterise the houses of this village which appears to be stuck in time. Passing through it - for over a century - lay a narrow-gauge railway track, that was made by a colonial trading company. Problems started arising when this track was converted to metre gauge in the 1990s.

In 2021, a clearance was given by the ministries to expand it to a double track. This was to feed the ports of Karnataka with supply of coal from Goa. The track which was once a boon for the villagers, slowly started becoming a curse.

Increased vibrations from heavy locomotives resulted in the development of large cracks, and foundational disturbances in the old structures of the village. Pollution has increased, and the railway authorities are now eyeing the demolition of these houses, by demarcating offsets from the track.

A study in the US have shown that, "a kilometre-long freight train, rumbling down 10km of rail is equivalent to an earthquake of 1.0 on the Richter scale."

(Excerpt from 'Heritage at Risk' by Lester Silveira, The Balcao. 2021.) The below photographs of the village have also been taken by Ar Lester Silveira.

As we observe, the challenges of conserving an old house (or any kind of old building) are not just limited to the boundaries of the structure. Problems go upto as far the neighbourhood, precinct, or city level. Both conservation, and sustainable development have the same set of principles at their core - the efficient use of our resources. Yet somehow, in the eyes of our policymakers and authorities, conservation does not align with development, and is rather, even considered contradictory. Moreover, the hesitation of private stakeholders to invest into conserving a building remains a huge hindrance. Not every person is going to be a sympathiser with values of heritage, or affluent enough to invest into the same for philanthropic, or other selfless motives. How then do we, as the guardians of our country's heritage, convince a greater number of people in society to invest, and value the act of conserving buildings? How do we convince the typically individualistic, and consumerist youth of the 21st Century that a legacy left by their great-grandfathers could potentially be of value to them? This is a conversation we shall come back to, at a later point in this paper as well. There is another layer of challenges that bring in a whole range of complications when dealing with our built heritage. The following section shall briefly attempt to understand the same.

The Legislation Dilemma - A Necessary Foe

Heritage structures and assets of our country - many, if not all - are often protected by a set of heritage legislations, by-laws, or regulations. There are also multiple levels of custodians of heritage in India. At a national level, we have the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which is responsible for the protection, conservation, and management of monuments / monumental structures, that have some historic, periodic, or material significance. At the state level, we have the State Archaeology and Museums Departments playing a similar role. Many cities in India, today, also have their own Heritage Conservation Committees, or the Heritage Cells under the Municipal Corporation (or any other local authority). All these bodies have a similar purpose - to formulate, and implement policies that enable the safeguard, and appropriate upkeep of built heritage under their jurisdiction. And despite their numerous drawbacks and loopholes, it is widely accepted that the absence of any such body / governmental policy has typically been detrimental to the safeguard of our heritage.

However, while the necessity of such bodies may not be a question, the effectiveness of heritage policies / guiding frameworks can always be debated, in the light of multiple incidents.

For non-monumental heritage, what we have in India is the Heritage Listing System. Developed along the lines of the listing system of the UK Town and Country Planning Act 1947 *(Labadi and Logan, 2016)*, this legislative framework caters to non-monumental buildings – historic houses and community spaces, elements of significance to a local community, important precincts, etc. This system has been adopted by various municipal corporations, and state heritage committees across India. What this Listing System does is – categorise buildings, structures, precincts etc into categories of Grade I, II or III based on their degree of importance, uniqueness or indigenous attributes – and therefore, prioritises their protection *(Chainani, 2009)*. Being the major governmental legislation for the protection of non-monumental heritage, its categorisation and exercise of power also invites major counter-implications. Some of these complexities with heritage in India have been discussed in the following sections.

The Croma store situated in a heritage building, at Horniman Circle, Mumbai. Adaptive reuse often provides a financial incentive for the conservation of heritage structures. Source: Whatsup Bombay, 2021.

(1) Heritage and the Capitalist Order

The Indian economy today – as in most other parts of the world – is of a capitalist order. Most major industries are run by private individuals, or corporations that seek to employ more efficient methods of revenue generation. *(Larkham, 1996)* The building industry is no different. Land plots in core areas of our cities often yield high prices; and when this gets coupled with demolition and construction costs, profit margins, etc they yield massive returns for real estate developers *(Juneja, 2015)*. Old buildings in Indian cities are brought down, or unrecognisably disfigured every day, and the vehement backlash often remains an unproductive reaction.

"(...) this capitalist imperative runs counter to the set of values based on aesthetic, environmental, non-quantifiable criteria. So there is a clash of values: land and property exploitation for capital gain, versus consideration of art, aesthetic, and historic appreciation."

(Larkham, 1996)

What it essentially implies, is that, in the capitalistic economy that we live in, any commercial activity - associated with building or land - is driven by the potential of revenue it could generate. If an old building is considered typically 'obsolete' by its owners, or stakeholders, it is quite likely to be cleared for something that generates more money for them. Even if a heritage building is to be kept, its appropriate adaptation and commercial utilisation become almost inevitable. This goes against the ideals of certain traditional schools of thought which tend to see conservation as some sort of a noble, or philanthropic effort. What they do not see, is that, this mindset not only discourages the conservation of heritage buildings, but also keeps them limited to being 'cultural' pursuits, rather than coming into the mainstream of the building industry.

"How do we rationally expect a local planning body to prioritise demands of conservation and authenticity by heritage committees, while under pressure from influential developers and corporation seeking massive investments, and other council committees looking for economic gains, or seeking to promote the city as a modern centre of business and commerce?"

(Warren, Worthington, and Taylor, 1988)

This is another factor which we - as guardians of the country's heritage - need to keep in mind. No government / private body, in today's world, would be interested in investing into a venture that does not, in way or the other, generate economic returns. While exploitation of heritage by real-estate sharks and developers is a risk, losing our heritage due to rigidity, or laidback mindsets is a much greater loss. Controlled commercialisation is a necessary evil that would eventually incentivise the conservation of our heritage structures. And embracing the same is the only rational way ahead in this pursuit.

(2) The 'Frozen in Time' approach to Heritage

It goes without saying that the origins of the modern practice of conservation lie in the field of archaeology. Monuments, and archaeological ruins - which are historical evidences - need to be preserved in their exact state, to testify the narrative they stand for. As a result, many heritage guidelines, frameworks, and even academic pedagogies - to an extent - were shaped by a similar set of principles.

However, this idea of 'preserving for posterity' might be relevant for monuments and archaeological sites, but certainly not for living historic areas with communities, and livelihoods *(Larkham, 1996).* This strategy for protecting urban heritage has led to the 'ossification' of many historic city / town centres, with them becoming museum displays, purely meant for touristic consumption. This kind of an approach emerged in mid-20th Century Europe (with Venice being a well-known example of the same), but over time, their policymakers and planners have realised the drawbacks of the same, and have attempted to re-work the policies. But a lot of government legislations, in India, continue to follow principles from the 1960s. *(Labadi and Logan, 2016; Chainani, 2009)* To understand this a little better, let take the case of the Heritage Listing Document (Model By-Laws) published by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA).

While a popular tourist destination, over 80% of the original residents of Venice have left the city due to the lack of conveniences, and tourism-centric heritage laws.
Source: Mustgo.

(C) Scope for Changes: No interventions be permitted either on exterior or interior of the heritage building or natural features unless it is necessary in the interest of strengthening and prolonging the life of the buildings/or precincts or any part or features thereof. For this purpose, absolutely essential and minimum changes would be allowed and they must be in	*Grade-II(A):* Internal changes and adaptive re-use may by and large be allowed but subject to strict scrutiny. Care would be taken to ensure the conservation of all special aspects for which it is included in Heritage Grade-II. *Grade-II(B):* In addition to the above, extension or additional building in the	Internal changes and adaptive re-use may by and large be allowed. Changes can include extensions and additional buildings in the same plot or compound. However, any changes should be such that they are in harmony with and should be such that they do not detract from the existing heritage building/precinct.

The above table shows Section (C) Scope for Changes under sub-heading 8.12 (Grading of Listed Buildings and Precincts) of the Model Building Bye-laws document published by the MoHUA.

To begin with, many scholars critic the Grading System for being ambiguous, and non-quantifiable. It has been termed arbitrary by many academics, and the understanding might therefore be open to interpretation by the Grader *(Labadi and Logan, 2016)*. If one reads through Section (A) of the above table - Definitions (not shown here) - it becomes pretty evident, that the grading of heritage structures / precincts is done not based on definite attributes or parameters, but rather very subjective terms. This can be understood by reading the first sentences of all 3 grades - I, II, and III. I shall quote from the same. *"Grade I comprises buildings and precincts of national / historic importance, embodying excellence in architectural style, design, technology (...); Grade II comprises buildings and precincts of regional / local importance possessing special architectural or aesthetic merit (...); Grade III comprises buildings and precincts of importance for townscape, that evoke architectural / aesthetic / sociological interest though not as much as in heritage aesthetics (...)"*

What exactly do the authorities mean by 'excellence in architecture' or 'special architectural or aesthetic merit'? How are we quantifying 'sociological or aesthetic interest' which is somehow less than 'heritage aesthetics'? The terminology which these documents are often made up of, are rather ambiguous and completely left to the discretion of the grader / surveyor. In absence of any further explanation, it inherently raises the question - 'whose heritage - the people's, or the government's?' *(Larkham, 1996)*

The other major point that is questioned in case of heritage bye-laws (or any kind of regulations) is the lack of any visible, quantifiable benefit to the owners, or stakeholders of heritage precincts. While listing does not imply that changes cannot be done, they are defined and monitored by the local body

(Chainani, 2009), which we also see under **Section (C) Scope for Changes**. But the question which this gives rise to, is what is more important, "the protection of private ownership rights, or the access to heritage for all?" *(Dedek, 2014)*

Most heritage listing / grading systems in India make it the responsibility of owners, or inhabitants to carry out repairs, and periodic maintenance in their listed properties, while also having restrictions / close scrutiny on changes they make to their own properties. As a result of such clauses, at many places, heritage stakeholders were found to be repelled by the idea of the 'Heritage' tag. In certain *Pols* of Ahmedabad, one can trace the outlines of metal plaques that have been removed from the doors / facades of old houses. Given that all of these structures are - at the end of the day - private properties, the grievances and paranoia of houseowners is quite justified. At present, the Heritage Listing System has only succeeded in preventing demolition of heritage buildings, in some cases. The regulations for the maintenance of the same are rather idealistic, and do not make any attempt to make conservation 'appealing' to the layperson.

Besides, in many places, it was also noted that political goons / touts threaten owners to sell their houses before they get listed, thereby putting restrictions on their use. This is, very often, a dirty tactic used to make greater profits by demolishing a heritage structure.

Therefore, in response to the economic setup, and the drawbacks of the existing Grading System, it is necessary that changes be made to bye-laws / regulations for, primarily, the following reasons.

(a) Although "people might favour the historic streetscape, they do expect all the advantages brought to us by modern buildings." *(Warren, Worthington, and Taylor, 1988)*

(b) Buildings are meant for use, and not merely as a museum display. If an old building cannot serve its purpose, why would the layperson - who is not necessarily considerate about heritage - be bothered to invest into, and protect the same? 'Preserving for posterity' is unrealistic when having to cater to practical concerns of use, and maintenance - unless its a monument, or an archaeological ruin. *(Larkham, 1996)*

A well-maintained, intricately carved timber facade in the Pols of Ahmedabad. This was the traditional craftsmanship of the city, and remains of it are still seen in many places.

Credits: Modo Designs

How to put it Through

Understanding the need for Incentivising the Conservation of our Heritage

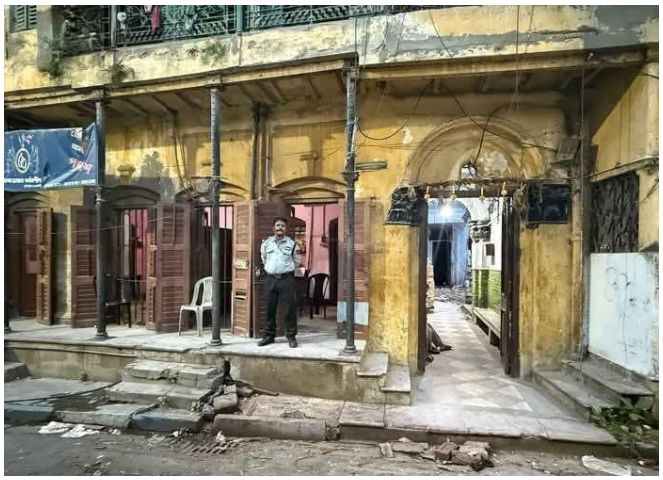
"Part of the problem is that many cultural assets are not traded in markets: they have 'zero price', and can be enjoyed by many people without any charge. Impacts of this market failure can be severe - underfunding due to insufficient funds generated, and strong reliance on supports and subsidies, which leaves conservation at the mercy of political whims and overstretched government budgets (...)"

(La Torre, 2002)

It goes without saying that, at present, the measures for heritage conservation that we have in our country - to whatever degree they exist - are not sustainable in the long run. Conservationists, and heritage policymakers rarely speak of any tangible, or quantifiable aspects that would encourage a much greater number of people to conserve their old houses / properties. Not only are aspects like money considered a 'taboo' in the conversations about heritage, in many places, the measures taken by governments are counter-productive. Human sentiments, and nostalgia are not strong enough to overcome the influence of money and power. This has been demonstrated in the field of heritage time and again, and one of the most well-known example in the recent times, is the demolition of the house belonging to the founders of India's oldest football club, Mohunbagan SG, in Kolkata.

But why bother?

A justified question that many might have is, "why bother conserving old buildings, when constructing new ones are faster, cheaper, and convenient?" To start with, it is an established fact, that the building industry is one of the largest consumers of resources, as well as polluters of the environment. Excavations, constructions, and manufacturing of materials such as cement release an immense amount of heat and dust into the atmosphere, that are harmful for the health and wellbeing of all life forms on Earth. World-renowned architect Carl Elefante once rightly said, "The greenest building is one that is already built." In an era wherein we are prioritising sustainable development, and heading towards a circular economy, it makes no sense to look down upon the act of conserving buildings.



The house at 44, Ramkanto Bose Street, Kolkata being demolished, as of May 2025. The house belonged to the founding family of the football club - Mohun Bagan - and was also their office till 1934. It was recent sold to a developer, citing 'difficulties in maintaining it due to a lack of funds'. Source: Times of India.

Old buildings in our cities and towns are ‘resource banks’ - not just for traditional knowledge systems and craftsmanship, but also construction materials. A study conducted by Economic Times in 2022, showed that about 66% of the net construction costs in India, comprised the expenditure on materials. *(Khan, 2022)* Very often, what we observe is that even when a building has been abandoned / considered ‘obsolete’, its materials - the wood, brick, and iron - are in fairly good condition to be reused. If we can reuse and recycle plastics and other materials, why not these building materials? The 66% price component mentioned earlier can easily fluctuate, depending on the market conditions. Why is then conservation - a practice which could cut down on material costs, and resource consumption - not promoted as a larger commercial venture? Additionally, it would also become a sustainable practice by reducing consumption of resources, and also the load on our landfill sites.

Moreover, in India, most of the traditional typologies of houses / buildings at large, were built to be climate-responsive. Walls made of brick / stone, plastered with lime, and roofs in wood / lime are what is suited to our climate, rather than glass facades which are in trend these days. Why, then, do we choose to spend enormous amounts on the operational costs of air-conditioning systems, when our buildings itself could keep us comfortable?

Furthermore, apart from material reuse and climate efficiency, another aspect is the embodied energy (total energy consumed in the processing of a material right from its extraction, till its final use) of these materials. The embodied energy for cement mortar is twice that of limestone, while an RCC slab consumes thrice the amount of energy than that of hardwood *(Maini and Thautam 2005, 2013)*. When we couple this with the fact that conservation allows us to reuse a material which was produced 50 or 100 years ago, the ‘unsustainability’ of the new material scales up exponentially.

Another major factor that is ignored, is the massive impact heritage conservation can have on the local economy, and the urban growth. This aspect is layered, and the reader can always refer to the bibliography section of this paper for an in-depth understanding. To begin with, conservation being an effort-intensive process generates employment for craftsmen for considerable periods of time. This involvement of masons, carpenters, etc into traditional craftsmanship also continues the generational knowledge systems our country has, thereby encouraging the youth to learn the trade too. Heritage buildings create tremendous potential for employment generation during their use phase as well. Old / heritage buildings tend to have different types and scales of spaces within them, due to their architectural layouts and construction systems. As a

The Calcutta Bungalow in Kolkata is a good example of conservation, and adaptive reuse. Modern inserts have been made into the bed-and-breakfast facility, while retaining many aspects of the historic fabric. Source: Calcutta Bungalow website.

result, these buildings become 'incubator spaces' for small-scale businesses, and enterprises. *(Rypkema, 2002)* This is a phenomenon we invariably observe in the commercial areas of our old cities. Buildings are almost always of mixed-use, thereby having a potential of generating revenue for its basic maintenance as well. Additionally, when heritage buildings are well-kept, the area's 'touristic appeal' increases as well. Businesses that support tourism - such as food and retail, hospitality, and local transport - start thriving as well. This, in turn, also generates livelihoods for the millions of people employed in the informal sector in India. *(Jigyasu, Jain, and Deb, 2013)*

Conservation can potentially aid urban planning as well, but is often not taken into consideration for the same. Efficiently adapting old buildings to accommodate modern functions would revitalise the historic cores of our cities - thereby utilising our existing building stock more efficiently, and improving the social image of these old neighbourhoods. The better utilisation of our cities' cores would, in turn, also help in controlling urban sprawl, thereby reducing the need for encroaching into forested areas, or filling up the wetlands.

Why do we need to incentivise it?

The answer is simple. A poor person who can only afford cheap coal to cook food at his/her home, would not be bothered about it being a pollutant, or unsustainable. In the same manner, an owner or stakeholder of a heritage building - who is facing financial, or other difficulties in keeping, and maintaining it - would not be convinced about conservation, just because it aligns with political, or global environmental goals. Conserving an old building needs to tangibly benefit as many people as possible. It is only then that conservation can be scaled up as a viable activity in the building industry.

Therefore, it is necessary that regulations and incentives are put in place that encourage the act of conserving an old building, without being restrictive or taking away from any aspect of private ownership. All such strategies should be an attempt to have optimum balance between building bye-laws, legal regulations, financial aids, and technical expertise on conservation. Possible ideas for the same - emerging from existing systems across the world - are listed below. These could always be developed to be more specific to a city, or region.

Sl No	Problem Statement	Proposed Solution / Incentive (Name and Brief Description)	Who would it benefit
1	At present, the Heritage Listing System in India seems to only 'monumentalise' ordinary buildings, freezing them in time and becoming commodities for visual consumption. There is also a paranoia amongst many heritage building stakeholders about listing, due to excessive restrictions and no direct benefits for them.	**Listing System as a tool for financial aid:** The state governments, and urban authorities should give grants, and financial aids to individuals, or bodies having the ownership of listed heritage buildings. These grants should be sanctioned with ease, to be used by people for the purposes of heritage consultancy, and conservation. If the owners / stakeholders - at the end of the first year - can justify the proper utilisation of the grant received, their would be a provision to step it up. If not, the same amount would be reduced for the next term.	Owners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of heritage buildings, as well as the government agencies.

2		**Giving the power of Listing to the people:** Instead of graders / surveyors appointed by the municipality, or a heritage body going around listing the buildings based on their understanding, let the houseowners / stakeholders / communities submit applications for their heritage to be listed. If Listing first becomes a tool to receive grants, many people would automatically be interested to protect their family, or community legacies.	Owners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of heritage buildings, as well as the government agencies.
3	Listing is often feared by many houseowners / stakeholders due to the impression that it would not allow them to make any changes to their private property. In many cases, political goons and touts hired by developers use the same argument to threaten owners to sell their houses, before they get listed.	**Registration of Qualified Conservation Architects / Heritage Professionals with the Municipal Corporation / Main Urban Body:** Along with financial aids, there should be a resource base for owners and stakeholders to consult trained professionals who can advise them on appropriate adaptation of their buildings to accommodate modern conveniences, while keeping the historicity intact. Their consultancy charges should also be a valid expense that can be shown in the utilisation of the government grants.	Owners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of heritage buildings, as well as trained heritage professionals such as conservation architects
4	There is a dire lack of trained professionals - such as civil and MEP contractors, craftsmen etc who are well-versed with the knowledge of traditional materials and / or conservation works, and are sensitive while working with heritage	**Training of new professionals, and tax incentives for professionals and establishments:** Similar to the above scenario, there would be a list of contractors / master craftsmen - specialising in conservation works - with the local urban body. These professionals would be given projects by the government for listed public, or private heritage buildings, and would have subsidies on their income / commercial taxes. In return, they would also be entrusted with the duty of training new professionals.	Owners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of heritage buildings, as well as contractors for conservation works, traditional craftsmen etc.

5	Most government bodies / agencies have a low priority for heritage and conservation works, due to quicker returns on investments from infrastructure, and other developmental works. This has, on multiple occasions, also resulted in the loss of heritage due to ignorance of concerned authorities.	**Formulation of independent Heritage Conservation Committees for every city / state:** It is most necessary that the main regulatory body for conservation of heritage is separated from other governmental bodies such municipal corporations and PWDs. This would help in fair decisions related to the heritage of the city/state. It should be comprised of architects, conservation architects, urban planners, infrastructure and transport experts etc and should also have the power to supersede any decision made by other governmental bodies. A close example of this is the Delhi Urban Arts Commission (DUAC). Any proposed changes to listed heritage buildings should also come to this committee for sanctions/reviews, rather than the municipality.	Stakeholders, and guardians / people concerned about the heritage of the city / state.
6		**Tax rebates, and incentives for companies / material manufacturers:** In order to increase the supply of materials such as lime, and timber - and thereby reduce their market prices in the long run - manufacturers, and material companies producing the same should have incentives or subsidies on their commercial taxes (which could range upto 30 or 40%)	Producers, manufacturing units, and dealers of building materials
7		**Incentives for lower expenses incurred on new materials:** Owners and stakeholders could be incentivised to procure lesser new materials by (1) reusing the old materials only, or (2) adapting the building in an efficient manner to reduce the expense on new materials from the allocated budget.	Owners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of heritage buildings, as well as the government agencies.

8	Conservation of heritage buildings, in general, is expensive. If we are to promote it over new constructions, it also needs to be ensured that there are sufficient funds with the concerned parties to carry out the same in an appropriate manner.	**Complete exemption of tax for residential properties, and partial exemption for mix-use:** For buildings which are ancestral houses / residential in purpose, and the owner/s wishes to conserve it for the same purpose, residential taxes should be exempted in such cases. In case the owner wishes to let out a space for commercial purpose - to aid the maintenance of the house - then a subsidised residential rate of tax can be charged, instead of the standard commercial tax.	Owners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of heritage buildings.
9		**Subsidised tax rates for commercial properties:** If a heritage building is proposed to be conserved / adapted for commercial use entirely (or more than 40% of its usable area), its rate of commercial tax should be much lower than that of a building of new construction.	Private investors, and real estate developers
10		**Miscellaneous funding schemes, and incentives for stakeholders:** A lot of British period residential, and commercial buildings have porches, arcades, and colonnades extending over the footpaths. At a later stage, when taxes were imposed on such 'extensions' beyond the demarcated plot boundary, it was observed in the some places that building owners decided to demolish these porches etc to avoid the taxes. However, they serve an important purpose. The porches, and colonnades keep the footpaths shaded, thereby making them walkable in our tropical climate. For older buildings having such architectural features, there could be tax benefits under schemes such as 'Urban Welfare' etc.	Owners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of heritage buildings.

11		**Proper implementation of Transfer of Developmental Rights (TDR):** The TDR as a policy exists on paper in many places. In dense historic neighbourhoods, where buildings have height restrictions, it is a provision to sell the extra FSI or FAR to real-estate developers, who could use it at a different place. This, if properly implemented, would also help in protecting many old buildings.	Owners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of heritage buildings, as well as real estate developers.
12	If large-scale conservation activity in a city or state is to be funded majorly by government funds, it would not be seen as a profitable venture by those in power.	**Schemes and Initiatives of Heritage Conservation through CSR:** If the state governments were to include the conservation of listed public buildings as one of the initiatives of CSR, private companies and MNCs could be encouraged to fund their conservation, and maintenance for 5 or 10 years. The government would not have any direct expense in such scenarios, and would only be involved in the technical provisions. This could be developed along the lines of the 'Monument Mitra' scheme of ASI.	Owners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of heritage buildings, government bodies, as well as private companies.
13		**Dedicated funds, and streamlined cess for conservation works:** Post 2013, the Government of Punjab has implemented a 1% 'Cultural Cess' on all PWD infrastructure projects, and government constructions costing more than INR 50 crore. This is a dedicated fund which is to be used for the conservation of historic sites and heritage buildings, and also for their management over time. This is a good policy that can be adopted by all states to protect their cultural heritage, while having a steady fund for the same purpose as well.	Owners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of heritage buildings, as well as the government bodies.

14	A lot of conservation projects that are undertaken these days appear to be purely whimsical pursuits - such as making museums, and cafes in every nook and corner. How can conservation of ordinary heritage buildings be of larger significance to the society / community?	**Neighbourhood planning, and Real Estate Analysis:** To make the best out of a conservation or adaptation project, it must be studied what purpose it could exactly serve. For example, a nursery school cum daycare might be good addition to a purely residential neighbourhood. Old, unused buildings can be adapted to exactly serve functions that the neighbourhood needs. This would give greater commercial value to the conservation project, and also help in connecting the old building with the lives of a larger group of people.	Owners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of heritage buildings, government bodies, as well as the people of the community / neighbourhood.

At the end of this discussion, two things need to be noted. First, is that the challenges that people face with old / heritage buildings are not just limited to finances, and building bye-laws. Old buildings are often not compatible with modern lifestyles, and nuclear families. However, such architectural and technical challenges are quite case-specific, and cannot be dealt with as a overarching narrative. The second, is that although majority of the incentives are based on grants, aids, tax benefits and exemptions, it would not be as big of a burden on the government as it appears. With better conservation of heritage, tourism and economy would be thriving in new ways, that have been discussed before. It would therefore generate indirect incomes for the government as well. But the start needs to be a top-down approach.

Moreover, the major factor which remains the driving force behind conservation of cultural assets, is the values and people's associations with them. It is the most indispensable set of values associated with heritage buildings. Often, people relate to physical spaces by virtue of use, memory, or performing an activity in it, rather than its physicality *(Chitty, 2017)*. Thus when old buildings are conserved, it instills a sense of pride in people's minds. And from evidence, conservation projects even have a 'whirlpool effect' of inspiring other people to doing the same with their houses *(Routh, Bhavsar, and Patel, 2022)*. Another heritage value that has come up in recent times is the 'uniqueness value'. "At a time when globalisation has led to identical cities in terms of IT, finance, and development patterns, it is heritage and culture that distinguish them from one another," argues the author of the UNESCO HUL Guidebook 2016. Quite often, the 'great breakthrough' to a place's development lies in the local, and not the global. It is, therefore, important that our heritage assets are kept well, keeping in mind this perspective as well.

Brief Inference

This paper aimed to narrow down to some of the major hindrances to conservation, and ways they could be addressed. There is still a lot more to this subject of heritage economics, and jurisprudence. I shall hope that the reader of this paper gets an insight into practical ways heritage conservation can be sustained, as has been testified by the successful implementation of some of the above points discussed. In India, unfortunately, we tend to associate anything that is old, with 'backward' or 'anti-development'. But the fact is, conservation is an inevitable part of sustainable development. Heritage conservation today aligns itself with the burning agendas of the 21st Century, and is no more just limited to being a cultural pursuit. But in order for people to explore the 'how', it is important that the 'why' is made clear first.

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